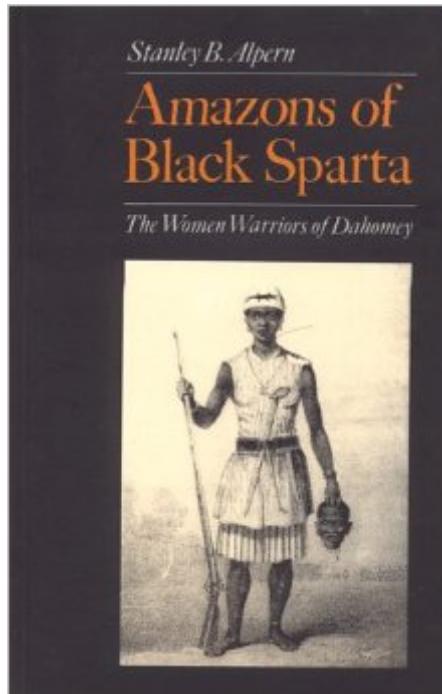


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S Of Black Sparta : The Women Warriors Of Dahomey



Synopsis

History is rife with tales of fighting women. More often than not, these stories prove more legend than history. Dating back to the s of ancient Asia Minor, myths of fierce, autonomous women of martial excellence abound. And yet, the only thoroughly documented s in world history are the women warriors of Dahomy, an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western African kingdom. Once dubbed a "small black Sparta," residents of Dahomy shared with the Spartans an intense militarism and sense of collectivism. Moreover, the women of both kingdoms prided themselves on bodies hardened from childhood by rigorous physical exercise. But Spartan women kept in shape to breed male warriors, Dahomean s to kill them. Originally a praetorian guard, the Dahomeans developed into a force 6,000 strong and were granted semi-sacred status. They lusted for battle, fighting with fury and valor until the kingdom's final defeat by France in 1892. Stanley B. Alpern has chronicled this remarkable history in depth for the first time. The product of meticulous archival research, s of Black Sparta is defined by Alpern's gift for narrative and will stand as the most comprehensive and accessible account of the woman warriors of Dahomy.

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Customer Reviews

This is truly a gem of a book for history buffs. It treats a heretofore unexplored topic in enlightening and fascinating detail. For professional historians also, Alpern's well-referenced history of the world's only known all-female fighting units is a singular contribution to the documentation of this unique combat force. Military aficionados should also consider this book essential reading for a

more complete knowledge of the history of the world's fighting forces. For more than 200 years the kings of Dahomey (in West Africa - now Benin) used large units of women warriors, under female command, as part of their regular troops in that nation's almost continuous annual conflicts with its neighbors. Although slow reading at first because of Alpern's meticulous adherence to detail, the book fairly races at the end as it describes the battles, triumphs, and ultimate defeat of the women troops by a modern French army. The author's research is all the more remarkable because of the utter lack of indigenous written records of these illiterate people. His glimpses into the history of the Dahomean s had to be painstakingly extracted from records in several languages of various European visitors to that area of West Africa from the 17th to the early part of this century. This book dovetails neatly with both African-American and women's studies. Not only were the s of Dahomey fiercely independent and strong but much of the warfare conducted by the Fon (the people of Dahomey) was for the purpose of obtaining slaves for their own use and later to sell to European buyers for transport to the Americas.

The mythical s of Greek legend were probably inspired by eye-witness reports of female cavalry soldiers of the ancient Russian steppe. But most historical record of those fierce Sarmatian, Sauromatean, and Scythian civilizations, except for some recently excavated kurgans, has been lost to time. Over a million women fought in the Soviet armed forces in World War II. And Eritrean women have been fully integrated in combat for the past thirty years in that impoverished nation's civil war with Ethiopia. Most women warriors have fought in gender-integrated regiments under male command. None have been so thoroughly documented as the all-female regiments of Dahomey s. Author Alpern has done a remarkable job of translating those documents for a comprehensive history of this once-splendid African kingdom. As early as 1729, European traders recorded existence of the fighting-women of the Fon (Dahomey people) and their neighbors the Ashanti. Originally retained as an elite royal guard, Dahomey s held semi-sacred status as celibate warrior "wives" of the King. They prided themselves on their hardened physiques and highly-trained martial skills, and constantly strove to outperform their male counterparts. During two centuries of raids and wars against neighboring kingdoms, Dahomeyan women increased their reputation as merciless undefeatable opponents. By 1890 they comprised over 30 percent of the Dahomey fighting force. With considerable bloodshed, and at cost of some 2000 s' lives, the Fon were finally defeated by the French Foreign Legion in 1892.

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